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December 17, 2009

The AAUP's Cary Nelson Goes to War

By Peter Schmidt

It is an understatement to say Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors, sees the nation's faculty members as on the defensive. In **No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom**, scheduled for publication by New York University Press in January, he argues that academic freedom verges on being a lost cause, shared governance is in retreat, and the professoriate is in danger of losing any semblance of job security in a work force dominated by underpaid adjunct faculty members. His response is to call for an all-out effort to win not just battles but the hearts and minds of other college employees—even students.

Mr. Nelson, who also is a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, discussed his book in an e-mail interview.

Q. Your book says academic freedom "now confronts challenges powerful enough to ask not what its future will be but whether it will have a future at all." What would life without academic freedom look like?

A. You can get a glimpse of the dystopian world without academic freedom by learning about higher education in countries like North Korea or Syria or, for less severe but telling examples, by talking to contingent faculty members in the United States who censor themselves to avoid offending students, parents, or administrators as a way of protecting their jobs. Or you can talk to faculty members at schools where administrators regard alternative opinions as insubordination.

The world without academic freedom would be one of routinized and unchallenging instruction provided by faculty members motivated by fear. Research would be limited to profitable projects, not devoted to maximizing human understanding. The world without academic freedom would be a cross between **1984** and a Cylon-dominated planet on **Battlestar Galactica**.

Q. You allege that conservatives have sought to curtail academic freedom by mounting attacks on entire academic

disciplines, such as women's studies. Are there disciplines that you regard as having been seriously harmed?

A. The most obvious effect when an academic discipline is subjected to repeated assault from outside the campus is a chilling effect on academic freedom. But even that effect will not be undifferentiated. A campus with strong academic-freedom traditions and with a sufficient percentage of tenured faculty can provide psychological support for faculty members' intellectual independence. As I point out in **No University Is an Island**, Middle East studies shows the most sense at present of being under public pressure and the most evidence of stress and self-censorship. But other disciplines—from women's studies to English—have periodically been put on the defensive.

Q. Your book says the AAUP needs to more clearly delineate the balance of power between institutions and professors when it comes to determining what is taught in the classroom. Why? Have you seen much evidence of faculty members' being severely constrained in terms of their teaching methods or the subject matter they present?

A. With the approval of our Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, I actually have just appointed an AAUP committee to study this problem and recommend how to negotiate the relationship between individuals and their departments in teaching.

As the reliance on contingent teachers has increased, we've received increasing complaints about decreased freedom in

choosing texts and designing syllabi. We need to find collegial ways of balancing institutional needs and interests with academic freedom, with an instructor's right to implement his or her pedagogical philosophy and choose assigned texts that match particular intellectual goals. A stifling uniformity is often imposed now in company with promises of more reliable instructional assessment and more predictable instructional outcomes, but inspired teaching can fall victim to these regimes.

Q. You call upon faculty unions to take various steps to encourage their members to talk about their job concerns and their institutions' employment practices in the classroom. What do you think this would accomplish? Aren't you worried about a backlash from administrators or others who object to classroom time's being used in such a manner?

A. I believe students should understand and reflect on employment conditions on campus. If their education relies on teachers' or secretaries' being paid slave wages, they should know so and consider taking some responsibility for the institution's policies and practices. Academic freedom should protect an instructor's right to spend (or not to spend) a modest amount of time discussing the economic realities that make a class possible.

If exploited labor is fundamental to campus life, then the campus teaching environment promotes acceptance of exploitation. Administrators need to decide whether they are community members with community responsibilities or managers indifferent to the welfare of those they employ.

Q. You say the AAUP, in investigating alleged violations of academic freedom, has focused too much on small religious institutions and historically black colleges and not enough on large research universities. Why is this so, and how do you plan to bring about what you see as the right balance?

A. We have taken up academic-freedom violations at many small schools because a style of imperial administration and a climate of coercion prevail at a number of such institutions and because faculty members at such schools often make eloquent, impassioned, and persuasive appeals for our help. What's more, the techniques for suppressing academic freedom keep evolving, so we regularly encounter egregious practices we'd never seen before, and it becomes necessary to draw attention to them and consider censuring the administrations responsible.

But I think it is now necessary for us to step back and take a look at decades of AAUP investigations, address the patterns of institutional bad practice comprehensively, and adjust our priorities. We will be able to take on larger and more high-profile institutions if we pay special attention to abuses of graduate-student employees and adjunct faculty, something our 2006 and 2009 policy revisions will help us do. And the high-handed imposition of layoffs, furloughs, and firings during the recession are giving us plenty of case material at research universities.

Q. You argue that the AAUP has devoted too little energy to protecting shared governance. Why do you think this is the

case? And why do you predict in your book that shared governance "will be a focal point of higher-education struggles over the next decade and more"?

A. I finished the book late in the summer of 2009, and I now feel that my prediction of more shared-governance crises in the future is, if anything, understated. That future is already here, with restructuring, program termination, curricular priorities, and basic funding increasingly imposed by fiat, rather than being decided collaboratively, and with shared budgetary information frequently both misleading and inadequate.

The system of university governance in the United States is broken. Faculty members and administrators too often operate with radically different value systems. Campus power relations thus require radical readjustment, so that the faculty can play a defining role in shaping and implementing the university's mission.

Q. You argue that academic freedom has been eroded by the emergence of a "neoliberal" conception of higher education that prompts college leaders to let market forces drive their decisions. How is this so? Is there an alternative philosophy protecting academic freedom that you see as standing any chance of taking hold in the leadership of academe?

A. Sadly, I think most faculty members are wholly unprepared to address this question. They can hardly articulate the philosophical aims and social purposes of their individual research, let alone those of their discipline as a whole. Reaching

philosophical consensus about institutional mission at a small liberal-arts college is imaginable, but it would be a bridge too far at a contemporary multiversity. Administration-driven "strategic planning," itself part of a neoliberal agenda, is typically counterproductive.

It is urgent that we begin conversations that could lead to a higher-education alternative to neoliberalism, but we are a long way from seeing any results from that process.

Q. You assert that academic freedom is being eroded by "the notion that higher education is first and foremost job training." How? Especially given rising college costs and our uncertain economic climate, wouldn't you expect people to be increasingly focused on the economic payoff of a degree?

A. There is every reason to make sure your education prepares you for a career. And there is every reason for parents and others to reassure themselves on that count. The problem comes when job training trumps all other university missions, including the crucial mission—for a democracy—of empowering citizens to be critically engaged with their country, with its history and its current limitations and aspirations.

College graduates should be skilled at evaluating political rhetoric, and analyzing and understanding legislation, public-policy proposals, and media representations. Just as important as job training, moreover, is helping students to educate themselves about the nature of work, so they don't end up in careers they

will hate. Higher education needs to embrace these more nuanced missions whether or not its stakeholders do so, though it also needs to educate the public and politicians alike about why it is important for educators to promote engaged citizenship.

Q. You repeatedly call upon professors to do more to advocate for improvements in the pay and working conditions of adjunct faculty members and other college employees. Yet I can easily see college administrators' undermining political support for such changes by arguing that they will drive up college costs and make higher education less accessible. Is there any way to keep a wedge from being driven between advocates of better working conditions on campuses and those who are primarily concerned with keeping college affordable?

A. The first step is complete budgetary transparency—about salaries, foundation resources, and every other campus expenditure. As I argue in **No University Is an Island**, the key ethical and political issue is how a campus spends the money it has. At any large institution, funds can be reallocated to provide everyone with a living wage and fair benefits. If you make humane values and working conditions your priority, you can almost certainly treat people fairly without raising tuition. But students themselves need to be drawn into this process and given enough information so that they too can be partners in equity.

Q. Your book proposes capping faculty salaries at \$200,000 and the salaries of coaches and administrators at \$300,000.

As a political matter, what do you think it will take to get the highest-paid people in academe to put up with big salary cuts? How do you counter the argument that any institution that brings about such a change will watch its top talent flee to institutions that have kept high salaries intact?

A. The proposal for a salary cap for faculty members refers to a standard nine-month salary, so that leaves summer teaching and summer research grants as an opportunity for some additional income. At my school, summer income can be as much as one-third of base salary, which brings total annual income under my recommendation to a maximum of \$266,000, an amount most faculty members will never earn at any point in their lives.

The most objectionable salaries—now four or five million for college coaches and a million for university presidents—are obscene and intolerable. They make a brutal statement about what matters most to an institution that is dispiriting and corrosive. I do not mind losing people whose greed has no limits.

Q. Your book jacket boasts that "Nelson is at his flame-throwing best," and on many pages you seem to direct your aim at your employer—the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—and at the AAUP's own staff. Are you at all worried about triggering reactions that will leave you burned?

A. The University of Illinois is used to me speaking my mind, but I have endured reprisals in the past and may face them again

in the future, though, in the months since **No University Is an Island** went to press, the two local administrators I criticize severely have both been forced to resign.

If they read the book, thousands of AAUP members will find that I give voice to what is in their hearts. One AAUP leader who is reviewing the book wrote to me to say, "How could any AAUP member not love this book?," when I asked the same question you did. I maintain cordial relations with all AAUP staff members—most of whom are highly dedicated—and expect that I will continue to be able to do so, though that does not prevent them from disagreeing with me or letting me know when they think I've erred.

In any case, most of our departments are now functioning very well indeed; my main complaint—except for several people no longer with the organization—is not with individuals but with the collective climate that sometimes prevails in the national office.